

Understanding Christianity in the history of African religion: An engagement with theological and anthropological perspectives in the pursuit of interdisciplinary dialogue

Author:
Retief Müller¹

Affiliation:
¹Department of Systematic Theology and Ecclesiology, Stellenbosch University, South Africa

Correspondence to:
Retief Müller

Email:
retiefmuller@sun.ac.za

Postal address:
Stellenbosch University,
Faculty of Theology, 171
Dorp Street, Stellenbosch
7600, South Africa

Dates:
Received: 31 May 2013
Accepted: 14 Aug. 2013
Published: 06 Aug. 2014

How to cite this article:
Müller, R., 2014,
'Understanding Christianity
in the history of African
religion: An engagement
with theological and
anthropological perspectives
in the pursuit of
interdisciplinary dialogue',
Verbum et Ecclesia 35(2), Art.
#874, 9 pages. [http://dx.doi.
org/10.4102/ve.v35i2.874](http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ve.v35i2.874)

Copyright:
© 2014. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS
OpenJournals. This work
is licensed under the
Creative Commons
Attribution License.

Read online:



Scan this QR
code with your
smart phone or
mobile device
to read online.

There is ample ground and good motives for interdisciplinary engagement between theology and the 'new' anthropology of Christianity. Theologians can learn much about the character of the church in all its plurality from the often insightful descriptions of anthropologists who have recently started to take a strong interest in Christianity. On the other hand, theologians can help anthropologists come to more complex understandings of the meaning of Christianity. Concerning contrasting anthropological perspectives of anti-essentialism and culture theory regarding the nature of Christianity, this article suggested that the work of missiologists, such as Andrew Walls, might usefully aid the progression of the debate and referred to the historical interplay and conflict between Christianity and indigenous knowledge in southern Africa by way of illustrating this point. The argument pursued in this article hinges on the prioritising of an interdisciplinary approach in theological studies, a cause which Prof. Julian Müller has long championed. Therefore, this contribution sought to honour his legacy by illustrating a further avenue of interdisciplinary engagement.

Introduction

Professor Julian Müller has always prioritised the value of and need for interdisciplinary engagement and contextualisation. Although a typical stance for a practical theologian, it was perhaps partly because of this approach that he was at times perceived to be somewhat controversial within the strongly confessional (doctrinaire) theological climate that prevailed in the Dutch Reformed Church for much of the 20th century and beyond. Defining one's faith not by bracketing out science, but rather in dialogue with science is an epistemological position often regarded as a betrayal of the gospel by conservative Christians.

Ironically, however, we are living in a time when certain non-theological social scientists (I shall refer to anthropologists in this article) are making the case for a renewed engagement with theology. Furthermore, Christian faith itself, whether consciously admitted or not, is always practiced in interaction with other forms of knowledge. In this vein, I shall point in this article to some of the ways in which Christianities have interacted with indigenous knowledge in Africa. From the outset it should be made clear, however, that this kind of engagement or even integration is not an African peculiarity, but rather one of the marks of the Church universal. It is in fact what happens when the incarnation of Jesus Christ is taken seriously.

Engaging the new anthropology of Christianity

In an article examining the relationship between theology and anthropology, Joel Robbins, one of the most prominent names in the new anthropology of Christianity, begins by mentioning the fact that his field has only recently acquired any legitimacy within the wider discipline of anthropology. Indeed, in the history of anthropology, any reference to Christianity in connection with ethnographic study used to be 'a complete non-starter in disciplinary conversations ...' (Robbins 2006:285). Whilst Robbins does not detail the reasons for anthropology's historical aversion to the idea of applying its theoretical framework and ethnographic methodology to the study of Christianity, Fenella Cannell (2006:1–50), in the introductory essay to *The anthropology of Christianity*, is more explicit in providing some of the reasons for this historically fraught relationship (see below). Although Robbins applauds the fact that this disciplinary taboo within anthropology has more recently been overcome, he wishes the re-engagement between anthropology and Christianity to go even further than ethnography. He makes the almost radical claim of suggesting that anthropology could learn something from the way theology approaches its own subject matter. It is particularly theology's commitment to 'otherness', that is, the

affirmation of a radically different way of life, that Robbins feels is a perspective where theology may justifiably critique anthropology for its unwillingness or inability in inspiring people to commit to change.

Curiously, Robbins (2008), Timothy Jenkins (2012) and also Cannell (2006:3) are particularly complementary about the theologian John Milbank (1990), who is perhaps best known for the case he makes in the book *Theology and social theory* that theology should turn its back on all social science, including of course anthropology, and pursue its own agenda instead. This would in effect mean that theology reclaims its position as the 'real' social science. To preclude the idea that this contra social science perspective of Milbank defeats the very argument I am trying to build here, let me mention that Milbank came to this idea after an extremely thorough and critical analysis of the social sciences and their Christian roots. Robbins (2006:289) summarises Milbank's conclusion, which amounts to the realisation that 'all of social theory is a breakdown product of a decaying theology'. Jenkins (2012) elaborates on this perspective and its potential implications for anthropology:

Despite the objective claims of secular functionalist theories, they are in practice theodicies: forms of judgement that attempt to explain human woe and well-being, involving both the social scientist and the objects of his or her interest in a common moral universe. (p. 467)

To reiterate, Milbank's rejection of the social sciences in their contemporary ethos comes after, not before, a prolonged period of sustained interdisciplinary engagement. His principle reason for ultimately rejecting social science relates to its ontology of power and conflict, which it is incapable of escaping from. This stands in contrast to Milbank's theological ontology, which indeed has mechanisms for overcoming power without violence. According to Milbank (1990:4, in Robbins 2006:289), the social scientific ontology gives us 'a reading of the world which assumes the priority of force and tells how this force is best managed and confined by counter-force'. Robbins (2006) judges Milbank's arguments against the social scientific ontology to be:

at least plausible in their main contention – that no secular thinkers really escape a first principles commitment to a view of the world in which difference naturally leads to forceful conflict that can only be contained or ameliorated by some use of counter-force. (p. 290)

That secular anthropologists such as Robbins, Cannell, and Jenkins would quote him with evident admiration, says much of the force and credibility of Milbank's argumentation. So much so that in their estimation Christianity and theology are not written off as *passé*, the outmoded remnants of a pre-modern worldview, which has been the predominant social scientific judgement on religion for much of the past century. Instead, under Milbank's inspiration, theology is seen as a kind of model, not to be followed or converted to, but amongst other things for helping anthropology reframe its own alternative social ontologies of otherness, 'by finding people who live in their terms and describing how they do so' (Robbins 2006:292).

One (theological) way of interpreting Robbins' (2006) approach in his article on the relationship between theology and anthropology is to suggest that he has discovered how rudderless a discipline such as anthropology can become when it proceeds without any interest in the question of teleology. Yet, as Cannell (2006) points out, a general teleological disinterest is by no means normative for social scientific approaches to the study of Christianity. On the contrary, such sociological and anthropological approaches 'have long tended to become mired in a highly teleological reading of the foundational anthropologists, and in particular certain kinds of readings of Weber' (Cannell 2006:2). This is a non-theological kind of teleology that finds its fulfilment in a quasi-religious belief in worldwide modernisation driven by the engine of inevitable secularisation.

Cannell (2006) acknowledges the validity of Talal Asad's (1993) argument that the category of religion is itself historically embedded in Christian thought, with the unavoidable consequence that Christianity unwittingly enters the picture whenever social scientists attempt neutral descriptions of 'religion'. Then she asks the further provocative question whether the term *modernity* has acquired 'superstitious' connotations for social scientists? A question which she answers:

Insofar as it implies an irreversible break with the past, after which the world is utterly transformed in mysterious ways, it is itself modelled on the Christian idea of conversion. (Cannell 2006:39)

According to the abovementioned reading of Max Weber which Cannell criticises, Christianity is seen as a kind of subsidiary element within modernity. It plays only a 'secondary or contributory' role in processes of modernisation (Cannell 2006:3). Contrary to this neo-Weberian stance, Cannell (2006:38) asserts that although the history of modernity might be 'inextricably bound up with the history of Christianity ... this does not mean that the meaning of Christianity is sufficiently explained by the history of modernity'. Owing to Christianity's historical proximity to Western academia, amongst other reasons, 'there has often been a tendency to assume that Christianity is an "obvious" or "known" phenomenon that does not require fresh and constantly renewed examination' (Cannell 2006:3). Cannell (2006:4) goes as far as to state 'that Christianity has functioned in some ways as "the repressed" of anthropology over the period of the formation of the discipline'.

This ideological blind spot is, in part, what some of the new anthropologists of Christianity seek to redress in various ways. For Cannell (2006):

Christianity is not an arbitrary construct, but ... a historically complex one. It is *not* impossible to speak meaningfully about Christianity, but it *is* important to be as specific as possible about what kind of Christianity one means. (p. 7)

This anthropological awakening to Christianity's complexity, including its central paradox of the Incarnation (Cannell 2006:7) obviously opens the door for dialogue with

theologians. At least a theological response is needed to the way Jenkins (2012:468), for example, phrase the social scientific predicament: 'the insufficiencies in social science categories may be repaired by recourse to more self-consciously theological thinking'.

Thus, Robbins' stated goal for anthropology (see above) of finding and describing people who live worthily 'other', that is outside the usual cycle of violent retribution, appears to be a very different kind of approach to teleology than the approach criticised by Cannell. Robbins hopes to find in the empirical world alternative ontologies of hope comparable to what theologians such as Milbank find within the transcendent categories of their 'Christian mythos' (Robbins 2006:292ff.). The potential problem for Robbins in this project of his is that he might fall victim to that old Christian cliché, according to which 'seeing is believing'. Christian theologians on the other hand, are also not free from imagining things, that is seeing signs of the coming Kingdom in empirical reality, but unlike the project proposed by Robbins for anthropology, finding or not finding signs of the times, much like the search for the Holy Grail, is not essential to theologians' *telos*, which remains in eschatological perspective. Methodologically, does this imply theologians are actually better suited for realistic, if not unbiased, descriptions of Christian cultures than idealistic anthropologists?

It is my contention that although theologians and anthropologists of Christianity obviously continue to have different goals, theologians should take heart from this renewed interest in their subject matter from the side of anthropologists. Not that this necessarily has bearing on resolving tensions regarding divergent truth-claims, but from a methodological point of view it is significant. From the side of theology, I would like to see growing appreciation of how insider and outsider interpretations of Christianity may play complementary roles in our assessment of world Christianity.

Culture analysis and anti-essentialist views of Christianity in conversation with theology

What becomes of Christianity when it is uprooted from its Western-colonial heritage and transplanted into African soil? Does it retain certain central characteristics through which it attracts and binds new converts, or does it lose any prior distinctiveness as new converts selectively deconstruct and reconstruct aspects of Christianity to suit their own needs and context?

Somewhat similar to the critique posited by Cannell (above) to one-dimensional interpretations of Christianity as merely a contributing factor to modernity, Michael Scott (2005:103) would like anthropology to 'conceptualise the localisation of Christianity as more than the appropriation or critique of modernity'. He therefore engages the work of two of the foremost proponents of the new anthropology of Christianity,

the already mentioned Robbins (1998, 2001, 2003, 2004) and John Barker (1992), and he perceives an underlying tension between their views, even if the two collaborate and cite each other's work (Scott 2005:101ff.). According to Scott (2005), Barker represents an anti-essentialist position, also termed 'the antimonolithic view of Christianity' by one of Barker's critics, Harvey Whitehouse (2006:296). According to this perspective, it is a mistake to view religions (including Christianity) as 'logically coherent systems' (Barker, in Scott 2005:103):

Barker models all religions as loose congeries of ideas and practices from which people pick up – and just as readily put down again – piecemeal bits as "flexible tools" for problem solving. (Scott 2005:103)

Therefore, Barker would tend to be sceptical of accounts that stress themes of radical discontinuity especially where the idea of conversion to Christianity is emphasised. Barker disputes anthropological opposition of the categories of Christianity and traditional religion as a distortion and even tantamount to ethnocentric essentialist understandings of 'Us' and 'Them' (Barker 1992:153). Rather, Christianity is viewed contextually as not radically different from the wider environment of popular religions with which it interacts (Scott 2005:103).

In contrast, Robbins (2004) understands Christianity to possess a unique 'cultural logic', which once inserted in an indigenous system can change things beyond prior indigenous expectations. In this vein, Robbins (1998:587–603) also speaks of Christianity's 'leading features'. Some of these leading features, discernible across all contexts in the comparative anthropology of Christianity, as mentioned by Scott (2005:104) include, 'its unrelenting individualism, its disenchantment of the phenomenal world, its radical rejection of the past and orientation towards the future, its dichotomisation of mundane and transcendent value ...'. Therefore, for Robbins and other cultural theorists, Christianity actually has a certain substance or dynamic that it carries with it wherever it spreads across the world. Although Robbins (2003:193–194) himself dismissed the tension between his and Barker's anti-essentialist view as a pseudo-obstacle to the wider work of the anthropology of Christianity, Scott (2005:104) counters that this is to make light of a serious methodological dilemma, whereby 'universalising theses about Christianity' are all too easily turned 'into *a priori* assumptions'. Even more pertinently he seems to suggest that Robbins in effect exhibits some of the same tendencies criticised by Cannell (see above), as the following statement indicates:

In practice, the profile of Christianity drawn by Robbins often looks more like an artefact of the co-development of Protestant Christianity and European modernity than the portable social scientific understanding of Christianity he identifies as the goal of comparison. (Scott 2005:104)

In the remainder of his article, Scott (2005) then proceeds to posit an anthropological reading of what he calls 'ethno-theology' as a way of counteracting the weaknesses in

Robbins' and Barker's divergent stances. Although it is all very illuminating, I lack the space to comment on this in detail. Rather, I want to propose ways in which theological treatises on world Christianity might fruitfully contribute to this discussion. In spite of the intellectual appeal of Milbank's radical orthodoxy, which turns its back on the social sciences, the reality is that when scholars of theological background endeavour to do research into Christian history and contemporary world Christianity, we inevitably become involved in comparable situations to what the secular anthropologists of Christianity face. Therefore, it makes more sense to engage with them on an interdisciplinary level, especially where some of them seem inclined to also be open to theological insights. In particular, I want to refer to the 'indigenising' and 'pilgrim' principles of the missiologist and historian of Christianity, Andrew F. Walls. In an important 1982 essay, republished in his prize-winning *Missionary movement in Christian history*, Walls (1996:7) states that Christian 'history has always been a battleground for two opposing tendencies; and the reason is that each of the tendencies has its origin in the Gospel itself'.

The first of these tendencies, Walls calls the *indigenising* principle. He gives the following explanation:

The impossibility of separating an individual from his social relationships and thus from his society leads to one unvarying feature in Christian history: the desire to 'indigenize', to live as a Christian and yet as a member of one's own society ... (Walls 1996:7)

According to this view, the New Testament witness, in opening up the possibility of salvation in Christ for Gentiles, gives a strong testimony against any particular cultural captivity of the gospel. Therefore, indigenisation becomes not only a possibility, but effectively a requirement for followers across divergent cultures to be authentic disciples of Jesus. Recognising this point does not make indigenisation non-controversial, however. Missionaries have generally appreciated its effectiveness as an indigenous church planting strategy, especially since the theological implications of the 'three selfs' (self-govern, self-support and self-propagate) as advocated by Henry Venn (see Shenk 1977) and Rufus Anderson (see Beaver 1979) became better understood. Controversy, however, ensued when local Christian converts lay claim to the process and often wanted to indigenise Christianity much more thoroughly than the missionaries or the mission educated church leaders were prepared to go. The well-known phenomenon of African Independent Christianity in the 20th century, particularly Zionists in southern Africa and the various prophet-healing movements across the continent, was partly the result of an indigenisation from below, whereby charismatic visionaries and their followers rebelled against the often limiting control exercised by missionaries and mission-educated elites.

Whereas Walls' indigenising principle would tend to lend interdisciplinary support to the above-mentioned anti-

essentialist view of certain anthropologists of Christianity, the second principle, known as the pilgrim principle, shows somewhat more affinity with the culture theory understanding of Robbins *et al.* Walls (1996:8) states that these two principles are in tension, yet 'equally of the Gospel'. The difference between the two principles can be summarised as follows:

Not only does God in Christ take people as they are [*indigenising principle*]. He takes them in order to transform them into what He wants them to be [*pilgrim principle*]. (Walls 1996:8)

To explain this pilgrim principle more thoroughly, one could state that it relates to the biblical idea of the follower of God as a sojourner in a strange land. There is no 'abiding city' for the Christian and being faithful to Christ might mean being out of step with wider society, 'for that society never existed, in East or West, ancient or modern, which could absorb the word of Christ painlessly into its system' (Walls 1996:8).

To conclude this section, I mention that Walls (1996) also refers to the indigenising principle as that which affirms the particulars of any culture and group, whereas the pilgrim principle might be considered a universalising factor. This is further explained in reference to the whole history of the church and the biblical Israel. 'The adoption into Israel becomes a "universalizing" factor, bringing Christians of all cultures and ages together through a common inheritance ...' (Walls 1996:9). This is both a general statement about the nature of Christian history and its common sourcebook, the Bible, as well as a theological affirmation about what it means to be church. Notably, Walls does not seek to define or narrowly describe what specific Christian universals might look like. A shrewd interpreter of history and culture, Walls would realise that such an attempt, which would be comparable to Robbins' 'leading features' (see above), might very well tend to prioritise his own indigenised Christian values and thus defeat the purposes of the pilgrim principle. Crucially for Walls, the two principles, although in tension with one another, are equally important in the totality of Christian history.

Therefore, the abovementioned tension identified by Scott (2005) in the writings of Robbins and Barker might be no other than analogous anthropological versions of Walls' pilgrim and indigenising principles. Christianity shares common ground across cultures, but it also diversifies and accommodates itself to local patterns of thought and practice. Anthropologists of Christianity invariably tend to notice one aspect rather than another. However, an appreciation of paradox, which is inherent to Christian theology, might be required to comprehensively describe Christianity in its contextual formation (cf. Cannell 2006:7). Furthermore, when discussing Christianity, no matter how contextually local, one neglects the historical dimension at one's peril. I shall now discuss certain issues dealing with the interaction between missionary Christianity and indigenous knowledge systems in southern and central Africa to further elucidate the concepts mentioned above.

Globalisation vs indigenous systems in southern Africa: Some bones of contention

In hindsight, it seems that an early phase of globalisation was introduced to southern Africa as elsewhere as a consequence of the European colonial enterprise (see Hopkins 2003). As a result of this, Africans became drawn into a global market economy. They were not free agents of course. In the case of slavery, which is the extreme form of the general subjection that took place under colonialism, Africans were effectively de-humanised and turned into currency to be traded and bartered. This painful history is well-known and we are still living with its lingering consequences today. Apartheid was a form of exploitation in the service of an agricultural or mining economy, which demanded a constant supply of the cheapest forms of manual labour, which were provided by Black Africans in South Africa (see Fredrickson 1981:199ff.).

The ones who gained from those early forms of globalisation were mostly White Europeans and colonial era White settlers of European descent. Owing to the drastically skewed power relations, the beneficiaries of colonialism were also nearly omnipotent in terms of laying down the rules of normativity regarding knowledge, values and so on. One important implication of this is that from a purely commercial perspective, which was a strong factor within this system, Africans themselves had very little, if any, intrinsic value attached to them. Their value resided in categories of instrumentality linked to their usefulness for cheaply fuelling the engine of the emergent global economy.

Therefore indigenous systems of knowledge (ISK) stood no chance of being recognised as intrinsically valuable by the normative patterns of early globalisation. Similar to the Africans who represented and expounded them, ISK might however receive recognition for their instrumental value; in other words in the ways they could serve the purposes of the global system and the interests of those who determined its direction. This is where Christianity also enters the picture. With varying degrees of commitment and success it played a counteracting or at least softening role to the otherwise ruthless impetus of unbridled commercialism.

However, missionary Christianity might indeed be seen as an important cog in the wheel of colonialism (Bosch 1991:303). Through its distribution of European systems of medicine, education and religiosity, missionary Christianity was a powerful agent not only for the gospel as chiefly intended, but also for the cultural goods of western civilisation more generally. It was especially the secular aspects of mission, which for example in the case of Dutch Reformed missionary work in Nyasaland included medicine, education, agriculture and carpentry, amongst other things (see Murray 1931:175ff.; Retief 1958:81ff.), that served to supplant and dethrone ISK from their previously all pervasive influence in African societies. If one looks past the generally good, if somewhat naïve, intentions of the missionaries themselves, taking into

account the wider context of a global capitalist system in formation, then it is hard to escape the contention that the secular aspects of missionary work by their transference of 'useful' skills served to transform Africans away from the roots of their ISK, which had no obvious benefits to the colonial enterprise, and towards better exploitable subjects imbued with the essential aptitudes required to serve western colonial civilisation. When one takes the view that the market determines our values to a large extent in capitalist societies, and unfortunately I think there is a good case to be made for that, then it becomes apparent that the dubious value of utility reigns supreme, also where it comes to people.

Christianity, through the contributions of the colonial missionary enterprise, must be viewed as irrevocably intertwined with globalisation. It is for this reason that I have been critical in a 2011 article on this subject, of Christian ethical approaches that treat globalisation as a kind of unredeemable Babylon (see Müller 2011a). The fact of the matter is that Christianity was partly responsible for the construction of globalisation as we know it today. As in the case of the relationship between Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and his monster, Christianity and globalisation cannot be that easily dichotomised and separated from one another. They are bound together even if the relationship is sometimes somewhat uneasy.

So from the above-sketched perspective, missionary Christianity has certainly not been a friend to ISK. There is however, a different side to this story. It is one thing to suggest, as I have done, that Christianity and globalisation have been historically enmeshed with one another. It would be quite another to equate them as if they were more or less like two sides of the same coin, or even worse, that Christianity was only a kind of secondary contributing factor to globalisation (cf. Cannell 2006:3). That would be a misrepresentation. Christianity has in fact displayed a great deal of ambiguity in the ways it interacted with local patterns of thought and custom. Far from generating a generically westernised Christian culture, the so-called McDonaldization effect that typifies certain forms of globalisation (see Ritzer 2013), a plurality of indigenous Christianities has emerged worldwide since the 20th century, as particularly recognised, for example, by the abovementioned anti-essentialist perspective in contemporary anthropology of Christianity. African Initiated Christianity such as found in the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) is also a prime example of this kind of indigenisation.

It is my contention that whilst the secular aspects of the missionary enterprise have, generally speaking, presented themselves as the unmitigated foes of ISK, the religious aspect had a more ambiguous role. On the one hand, many missionaries tended to regard the African religious traditions they encountered as tantamount to demonic possession, which had to be eradicated at all costs. In some cases, they also severely disrupted traditional kinship affiliations and family life by forcing potential converts to forgo their

polygamous marital relations as a precondition for baptism, which often caused much anguish (see Retief 1958:49). On the other hand, the more sensitive amongst the missionary ranks were able to recognise within these traditions elements of grace. Put differently, some elements of African Traditional Religion, such as the general belief in a Supreme Deity, as well as existent creation myths and other aspects of their moral and spiritual cosmologies, were taken to constitute a kind of *preparatio evangelica*, which could be utilised as points of contact for the gospel (see Murray 1931:67).

It is therefore interesting to note that the value of *preparatio evangelica*, which was the best possible conception that missionaries tended to have of African religious traditions, especially in that it emphasised the origins of humanity as springing forth from 'common blood' (Murray 1931:67; Retief 1951:177), still remained for many of them at the level of an instrumental value – instrumental for helping Africans along the way of adopting the values of the missionaries themselves. However, something unexpected happened. As they converted to Christianity, Africans also tended to convert the character of the faith they were adopting through the medium of vernacular languages. Andrew Walls (1996:26–42) refers to the 'vernacular principle', occurring throughout Christian history, and which in Africa effectively initiates a two-way process of Christianisation and Africanisation. As African peoples became Christian, Christianity became African at the local level. Far from remaining at the level of a *preparatio evangelica*, the African religious traditions continued to inform and interact with Christianity in a kind of on-going hybridity that is especially apparent in some forms of African Initiated Christianity, but not restricted to those.

Let me now mention some specific examples of Christian opposition to or interaction with ISK. I want to consider a couple of issues missionaries confronted when they entered the field. I have read some biographical and autobiographical accounts of late-19th and early-20th century Afrikaner missionaries to Nyasaland and Mashonaland, so this is what I refer to in this section, although related themes were occurring across sub-Saharan Africa.

The poison cup

One issue that missionaries to Nyasaland opposed quite fiercely was the use of the 'poison cup' (*mwabvi*) (Murray 1931:47ff.; Retief 1951:130, 1958:28ff.). The 'poison cup' was a widely distributed judiciary method used to determine an accused party's guilt or innocence, particularly when the use of sorcery or witchcraft was suspected. Furthermore, whenever a traditional ruler was faced with the problem of solving a tricky legal dispute, the 'poison cup' could be administered as a way of uncovering the truth. The accused party takes a drink from the cup. Should they die as a result of drinking the concoction, which was made from the extract of the bark of a certain tree, then their death would prove their guilt. Should they survive, it would prove their innocence on the other hand. The poison cup was administered not only

when a ruler had to adjudicate on matters brought before them, but a ruler could also use the cup when their own position was threatened. When a ruler believed that their opponents were conspiring to overthrow them, they might rely on the wisdom of the cup to sort out between those loyal and treacherous amongst their subjects.

This practice is a clear example of an ISK at odds with both Western empiricism and missionary ethics. From the point of view of the ISK, the efficacy of the poison cup had little to do with the empirical reality of poison entering the bloodstream, destroying the cells of the organism which imbibed it. The efficacy of the cup resided at a metaphysical level. Death or survival was related to the gods' or ancestors' protection of or withdrawal from a person so tested by the trial of the cup. From the missionaries' point of view, however, the incidence of death or survival as a result of the poison cup was a purely random matter, having to do with the relative strength or weakness of the accused's overall constitution. Naturally, the missionaries opposed this practice both on empirical and ethical grounds. Undoubtedly, these Dutch Reformed Church missionaries displayed little in the way of intercultural sensitivity in their attempts at the eradication of a custom they considered irredeemably evil. Nonetheless, because this was a matter of life and death, one would be hard pressed to fault the Christian mission for their strong opposition to the poison cup. Contemporary Malawian Christians I have asked about this also voiced their agreement. Therefore, might it be appropriate with the benefit of hindsight to point to early Christian opposition to the poison cup as an example of Andrew Walls' pilgrim principle at work?

Rain rituals

It is important not to romanticise ISK. The reality is that it served certain purposes in African societies, which were often closely linked to upholding the authority of a traditional, often despotic ruler. The abovementioned case of the poison cup illustrates this. Another example, which in my opinion also serves as one of the best illustrations of hybridity in African indigenous Christianity, concerns the case of rain prayers and rituals. This might also be indicated as exemplary of Walls' indigenising principle at work in Africa. I have written about this issue before (Müller 2008) and in a recent article together with a colleague we trace the history and continuity of rain and water rituals in southern Africa (Müller & Kruger 2013).

In an often water-stressed part of the world, rain rituals served important religious and political purposes. It was the responsibility of traditional rulers to secure rain at appropriate times for the well-being of the people under their charge. Either the rulers themselves or a rain specialist appointed by them would be entrusted with the task of administering certain rituals to ask for rain at seasonally determined times or in special cases when the need became particularly pressing. The most famous rain specialist in southern Africa has traditionally been Modjadji, the rain queen of the Lovedu (see Krige & Krige 1943). But there

have been many others, both in the past and in the present. The political security of a ruler often depended on their perceived ability to be successful in the procurement of rain. Historically, there have been cases of rulers losing their hold over people as a result of an insufficient success rate in this matter (see Schapera 1971:133).

For self-explanatory reasons, I think this aspect of ISK had lesser potential for being manipulated for selfish political purposes by rulers and ritual specialists than the abovementioned poison cup. Not surprisingly, missionary responses to the issue of rain calling rituals have been much more ambivalent. Amongst the London Missionary Society, some, such as Robert Moffat, who was a missionary amongst the Tswana people, vehemently opposed it and derided it as ignorant superstition. Others saw in it an opportunity. Recognising that the ritual depended on the benevolence of a transcendental power or powers, certain more culturally sympathetic missionaries, such as Johannes van der Kemp amongst the Xhosa, stepped into the role of rain specialist themselves by praying to the Christian God for rain at critical junctures in their relationships with the people (Hastings 1994:315).

There are also reports of such actions by Dutch Reformed missionaries and evangelists in Nyasaland and Mashonaland (Louw 1965:137; Murray 1931:188). Successful rain prayers often served as a strong catalyst for conversion to Christianity as it apparently helped to convince many people of the superior power of the Christian God and of the credibility of the missionaries. Nyasaland missionary J.A. Retief, for example, mentioned the interesting case of a powerful 'rain goddess' by the name of *O Cauwa* who lived near Mkhoma mission station. In a year of poor rainfall the mission church council decided to have a prayer meeting. The 'rain goddess' apparently then decided to schedule her own prayers and accompanying ritual for the exact day and time as the Christian prayer meeting, because she claimed that if the rains fell after the Christian prayer, then they would receive all the credit for it rather than she. Retief (1951:145) deduces from this that she must have had a strong faith in the Christian prayers. This explanation of a rain specialist possibly becoming increasingly convinced of Christian superiority in her area of expertise is not entirely without grounds, given the fact that she later converted to Christianity and was baptised after a prayer campaign by the Mkhoma Christians to achieve this very end. Apparently her decision caused a great deal of controversy amongst the traditional rulers of the area, who feared that this would irrevocably undermine their position. Some attempted to dissuade *O Cauwa* from becoming Christian, but they were unsuccessful (Retief 1951:218–219).

This willingness of some missionaries to pray for rains under conditions that created expectations similar to what had been in place in pre-Christian times, points to an important characteristic of Christianity that has been widely commented upon by mission historians Lamin Sanneh (1989), Andrew

Walls (1996) and others. This has to do with the issue of 'translatability'. According to the translatability thesis, the Christian gospel has the ability to become completely at home within any culture and language. No human society has the potential to remain untouched by the gospel. All is potentially receptive to it. Therefore, what those missionaries did when they emulated the role of rain specialist was not simply opportunism as it might otherwise seem, but in fact completely natural given the translatable character of the faith they were proclaiming. Walls (1996) refers to the actions of early Christians in Antioch as an early example of exactly this kind of thing. From the description in Acts 11, it seems that some Jewish followers of Jesus deliberately chose to contaminate their own traditions in order to be 'translatable' to the Gentiles in that city who also started to show interest in the story of Jesus. They presented Jesus by the title *Kyrios*, which was the word used by the Gentiles to call on their pre-Christian cultic divinities (Walls 1996:52). This kind of translatability has become paradigmatic for the cross-cultural nature of Christianity as a missionary religion.

Arguably, African Initiated Christianity represents some of the most deeply contextualised forms of Christianity in southern Africa. In other words, a church such as the ZCC has carried the translatability of the gospel further than most. I have been present on a couple of occasions in 2005 when the church leader, Barnabas Lekganyane, was invited to pray for rain by the mayors of cities in the Northern Cape and in Botswana (Müller 2011b:143ff.). On both occasions, these events received serious attention by church members and media alike. Interestingly, his prayers were apparently successful on both occasions, quite dramatically so in one of the cases. The speculation and debate, especially in the Gaborone newspapers, regarding the Bishop's ability to pray successfully for rain, is, I think, very much indicative of the role traditional rain specialists fulfilled. It is also a major reason for the high esteem that the ZCC members tend to have for their Bishop and an underlying source for the spiritual vitality this church exhibits in attracting and retaining members. It is believed to be a church where 'power' is present.

Whatever one chooses to think of this, the point I am trying to make by referring to this example is that Christianity has not been uniformly damaging to ISK. It clearly has not been wholly monolithic, even in its demand for exclusive commitment. In terms of religiosity, it might even be suggested that it has given a lifeline to some aspects of ISK, which have otherwise been completely suppressed by the secular aspects of the colonial project. Some aspects such as the previously mentioned poison cup have been debunked on ethical and theological grounds. On the other hand, we may be sure that although the poison cup clearly represents an example of something that was rejected for good reason, many other aspects of ISK, particularly those involving herbs and medicine would similarly have been rejected by missionaries on much more spurious grounds. It is also interesting to note that Zionist churches tend to restrict or

forbid the use of material substances connected to ISK, including African beer, medicine (*muti*) and so on. However, these substances are then substituted by other church sanctioned, blessed materials (see below), thus contradicting evolutionary theoretical notions regarding an increased separation between the sacred and the profane.

Conclusion

My conclusion is that, as a result of the translatability of Christianity, African religiosity has been far more successful at resisting the onslaughts of colonialism and globalisation and the market-oriented tendency to reduce everything to the level of utility than other forms of ISK. It is important to immediately qualify this conclusion, however, by adding that it is a de-materialised version of African religiosity that has, by and large, been translated into Christianity. However, before giving undue credit to the abovementioned secularisation thesis that would have Christianity as a contributing factor to the disenchantment of the material world, we should not forget the example of rain ritual and the Christian versions thereof. A Christian prayer for rain of course starts off on a spiritual plane, but it might have important material implications if it is believed to be successful (cf. the abovementioned case of *O Cauwa*). Therefore, a certain re-materialisation takes effect. This is comparable to a multiplicity of blessed or prayed over materials distributed within a church such as the ZCC for example. Although many traditional African substances including beer and herbs are forbidden, one finds ordinary household products including teas, coffees, salt, Vaseline, *mabele* (an African flour made from sorghum) and other substances often given as prescription offered in prophetic sessions (see Müller 2011b:65–91). Therefore, through ZCC prophecy, a sacralisation of otherwise ordinary material substances occurs. This contaminates a secularisation thesis that insists on a growing differentiation between different spheres of the public life. Owing to the ongoing, underlying influence of ISK, things are just not as clear-cut and predictable in Africa. Theologically speaking, re-materialisation makes good sense in a Christianity that takes Incarnation seriously. From such a theological perspective, authentic spirituality absolutely must have material consequences.

Furthermore, I find it interesting that religiosity, which is often taken to be amongst the most reactionary and retrograde categories of human society from the point of view of science, could in this case to be clearly shown to be some distance ahead of empirical science in the way that it continues to channel some important aspects of ISK. The hard sciences in their dominant Western paradigm, on the other hand, have only recently become attuned to the need to not be summarily disdainful of the value of ISK. Much of normative science might still be finding it very difficult to allow itself to be changed by other forms of knowledge. Of course, therein resides the problem and it exposes the way power relationships between the West and the rest still needs a lot of intercultural adjustment. Would it be going too far to suggest that this is an area where religious studies and theology are ideally placed to assist the hard sciences in

rethinking their paradigms as part of our interdisciplinary attempts to engage with ISK?

Finally, I refer more specifically to the more serious conversation I would like to see developing between anthropologists of Christianity, on the one hand, and insider historians of Christianity and theologians on the other. Andrew Walls' twin forces in Christian history, accompanied by the overarching translatability thesis, have always impressed me as very good conceptual tools for making sense of plurality and particularly the importance of local agency in contemporary world Christianity. When brought into conversation with Michael Scott's contrasting portrayals of the anti-essentialist and 'cultural logic' perspectives in the anthropology of Christianity, I feel that, as mentioned above, they are somewhat comparable to Walls' two principles. However, I cannot help but feel that the way the translatability thesis has apparently played itself out in African Initiated Christianity, lends perhaps more credence to the non-essentialist position. Perhaps rather than exhibiting universal 'leading features' discernible across cultures, it is simply cultural translatability that forms the backbone of whatever cultural logic there might be in Christianity. Walls is careful not to specify what sorts of characteristics the 'pilgrim' principle might take cross-culturally, and this seems to be imminently sensible, because that too would be culturally conditioned of course. One is on safe terrain with the pilgrim principle, as the name implies, as long as one allows it some freedom, that is not try to pin it down by filling it with content, which may end up being simply one's own wish list for Christian universals. Translatability, which by its very nature is content free as well as being intriguingly analogous to Incarnation, seems to be the only real constant in Christianity.

To make this concrete, if one wishes to consider a group such as the ZCC in all its depth as legitimately part of Christianity, even as somewhat representative of Christianity in much of southern Africa, which has been my been my stance generally, then one is on a sounder footing methodologically with an anti-essentialist perspective rather than entering the field looking for pre-conceived indications of Christianity's cultural logic. This may seem paradoxical, but that is Christianity in a nutshell.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

References

- Asad, T., 1993, *Genealogies of religion: Discipline and reasons of power in Christianity and Islam*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore. PMID:8507335
- Barker, J., 1992, 'Christianity in Western Melanesian ethnography', in J. Carrier (ed.), *History and tradition in Melanesian anthropology*, pp. 144–173, University of California Press, Berkeley. PMID:PMC1554220
- Beaver, P., 1979, 'The legacy of Rufus Anderson', *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research* 3(3), 94–97.

- Bosch, D.J., 1991, *Transforming mission: Paradigm shifts in the theology of mission*, Orbis, Maryknoll.
- Cannell, F., 2006, 'Introduction: The anthropology of Christianity', in F. Cannell (ed.), *The anthropology of Christianity*, pp. 1–50. Duke University Press, Durham.
- Fredrickson, G.M., 1981, *White supremacy: A comparative study in American & South African history*, Oxford University Press, New York. PMCID:PMC1808402
- Hastings, A., 1994, *The Church in Africa 1450–1950*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Hopkins, A.G. (ed.), 2003, *Globalization in world history*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York.
- Jenkins, T., 2012, 'The anthropology of Christianity: Situation and critique', *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology* 77(4), 459–476. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2012.669775>
- Krige, E.J. & Krige, J.D., 1943, *The realm of a Rain-Queen: A study of the pattern of Lovedu society*, Oxford University Press, London.
- Louw, A.A., 1965, *Andrew Louw van Morgenster*, N.G. Kerk Uitgewers, Cape Town. PMCID:PMC1552272
- Milbank, J., 1990, *Theology and social theory: Beyond secular reason*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford.
- Müller, R., 2008, 'Rain rituals and hybridity in southern Africa', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 29(3), 819–831.
- Müller, R., 2011a, 'Christianity and globalisation: An alternative ethical response', *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* 67(3), Art. #963, 7 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v67i3.963>
- Müller, R., 2011b, *African pilgrimage: Ritual travel in South Africa's Christianity of Zion*, Ashgate, Farnham.
- Müller, R. & Kruger, F., 2013, 'Rain and water symbolism in southern African religious systems: Continuity and change', *Exchange* 41(2), 141–154.
- Murray, A.C., 1931, *Ons Nyasa-Akker: Geskiedenis van die Nyasa Sending van die Nederd. Geref. Kerk in Suid-Afrika*, Stellenbosch, Pro Ecclesia.
- Retief, J.A., 1951, *Ontdekkings in Midde-Afrika*, Die Christen-Studenteverenigingmaatskappy van Suid-Afrika, Stellenbosch.
- Retief, M.W., 1958, *William Murray of Nyasaland*, transl. and abridged by M.H. le Roux & M.M. Oberholster-Le Roux, Lovedale. PMCID:PMC2028773
- Ritzer, G., 2013, *The McDonaldization of society: 20th anniversary edition*, Sage, Thousand Oaks.
- Robbins, J., 1998, 'Becoming sinners: Christian transformations of morality and culture in a Papua New Guinea society', PhD dissertation, Department of Anthropology, University of Virginia.
- Robbins, J., 2001, 'Introduction: Global religions, Pacific Island transformations', *Journal of Ritual Studies* 15(2), 7–12.
- Robbins, J., 2003, 'What is a Christian? Notes toward an anthropology of Christianity', *Religion* 33, 191–199. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0048-721X\(03\)00060-5](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0048-721X(03)00060-5)
- Robbins, J., 2004, *Becoming sinners: Christianity and moral torment in a Papua New Guinea society*, University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Robbins, J., 2006, 'Anthropology and theology: An awkward relationship', *Anthropological Quarterly* 79(2), 285–294. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/anq.2006.0025>
- Sanneh, L., 1989, *Translating the Message: The missionary impact on culture*, Orbis, Maryknoll.
- Schapera, I., 1971, *Rainmaking rites of Tswana tribes*, Afrika-Studiecentrum, Leiden.
- Scott, M.W., 2005, "'I was like Abraham": Notes on the anthropology of Christianity from the Solomon Islands', *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology* 70(1), 101–125. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00141840500048565>
- Shenk, W., 1977, 'Henry Venn's legacy', *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research* 1(2), 16–19.
- Walls, A.F., 1996, *The missionary movement in Christian history: Studies in the transmission of faith*, Orbis, Maryknoll.
- Whitehouse, H., 2006, 'Appropriated and monolithic Christianity in Melanesia', in F. Cannell (ed.), *The anthropology of Christianity*, pp. 295–307, Duke University Press, Durham.